

*‘From Our Side Rules Are Followed’:
Authorizing bureaucracy in Nepal’s
‘permanent transition’**

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Abstract

This article explores how local civil servants produce the conditions of possibility for bureaucratic authority in Nepal’s contested political environment of war and post-war ‘transition’. Specifically, it examines the everyday practices of local civil servants as they attempt to influence the distribution of such public resources as agricultural inputs and local government budgets. The article asks: how do local civil servants produce the authority necessary to get things done in the face of changing local government structures *and* rival authority claims from *both* wartime Maoist People’s Governments and resurgent patronage politics in the post-war period? In a context characterized as ‘ordinary extraordinary’, the article suggests that local civil servants employ a form of practice that has been termed ‘tactical government’ and proposes three distinct forms of this practice. However, the article also argues that tactical practice tells only part of the story and that it can be insightful to enrich our understanding of tactical government with an analysis of more general life projects. Bureaucratic practices are also motivated by factors such as the significance of the contested resource and paternal ideas of ‘the common good’. Such a suggestion is in line with recent work on everyday lives in situations of protracted violent conflict and insecurity, and on the role of culture in producing civil servants/services. Looking at these two forms of practice together, in particular their interconnections, gives us a fuller account of how authority is produced. Furthermore, it allows more nuanced and detailed perspectives into the complex process of state-making.

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Introduction

This article is about ‘everyday government in extraordinary times’¹ or, more specifically, about everyday government when extraordinary times become the ordinary state of affairs. Over the past several decades, Nepal has certainly experienced extraordinary times, including a series of unfinished revolutions, a civil war (1996–2006), and a recurrently contested process of state (trans-) formation.² The notion of ‘transition’ has been deployed to label several political moments, including the post-1990 reintroduction of multiparty politics and the present post-war juncture. As one of my informants explained: ‘We have faced transition several times. Transition is a major disease. And this is the biggest transition phase we are passing through. People have expectations.’³ Transition has been a repeated and somewhat problematic experience, likened in this case to a chronic disease. Taking the broader context of Nepal’s political history into account, Harald Wydra’s notion of ‘permanent transition’—a permanent threshold situation recurrently oscillating between a dissolution of order and political utopia—seems apt for Nepal as well.⁴ Of course, the concepts of ‘post-’, transition, and so on can be easily critiqued for their simplistic and teleological assumptions.⁵ But what is particularly interesting about the case of Nepal is that so-called ‘transition’ has become a repeating and seemingly permanent (ever-unfinished) phenomenon.

In this article I explore what this permanent threshold situation means for local governance, specifically how local civil servants go about their work in the midst of the contested authority and unstable governing conditions of ‘permanent transition’. In so doing, I hope to generate insights into the central theme underlying this special issue: how public authority is constructed in contested political environments. The everyday practices of local civil servants are the

¹ I. Feldman, ‘Everyday Government in Extraordinary Times: Persistence and Authority in Gaza’s Civil Service, 1917–1967’, *Contemporary Study of Science and History* 47, no. 4 (2005).

² A. Nightingale et al., ‘Fragmented Public Authority and State Un/Making in the “New” Republic of Nepal’ in this special issue.

³ Interview, 16 November 2011.

⁴ H. Wydra, *Continuities in Poland’s Permanent Transition* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); see also L. R. Baral, *Oppositional Politics in Nepal* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977).

⁵ See also S. Schneiderman and A. Snellinger, ‘Framing the Issues: The Politics of “Post-Conflict”’, Hot Spots, *Cultural Anthropology* March (2014).

ethnographically specific basis of this inquiry. To analyse the practices of rule and authorization processes in which local civil servants engage, I first employ the concept of tactical government. This concept was proposed by Ilana Feldman in her study on bureaucracy, authority, and practices of rule under different temporary regimes of governance in Gaza.⁶ In the case of local civil servants in Nepal, I identify 'absent presence',⁷ persuasion, and 'rule talk'⁸ as practices of tactical government.

While such an analysis is insightful, I suggest that it should be complemented by looking beyond the domination–resistance dynamic inherent in the concept of tactics. I argue that we should consider such bureaucratic practices as being part of an alternative form of agency, one that Sherry Ortner defines as the pursuit of specific (culturally informed) projects.⁹ Therefore, my argument in this article is that in a context of permanent transition, certain uncertainty, and extraordinary as ordinary, 'tactical government' and 'pursuit of projects' are interconnected forms of practice that are central to how local civil servants claim authority. By looking at these two forms of practice together, we can take into account both the inevitable influence of power dynamics *and* the multiplicity of alternative projects, plans, and desires that may motivate actors such as local civil servants. This gives us a fuller account of the 'conditions of possibility for authority'.¹⁰ Furthermore, it provides useful insights into the cultural underpinnings of state formation processes, allowing us to account for both heterogeneity and consistency.

This argument is elaborated in the following four sections of this article. The first section introduces the concept of authority and outlines how the everyday practices of local civil servants can illuminate how authority is produced. It also introduces tactical

⁶ I. Feldman, *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917–1967* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷ M. Herzfeld, 'The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002); P. Williams, 'An Absent Presence: Experiences of the "Welfare State" in an Indian Muslim Mohallā', *Contemporary South Asia* 19, no. 3 (2011).

⁸ M. Nuijten and D. Lorenzo, 'Ruling by Record: The Meaning of Rights, Rules and Registration in an Andean Comunidad', *Development and Change* 40, no. 1 (2009).

⁹ S. B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); S. B. Ortner, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Feldman, *Governing Gaza*, p. 3.

government as an analytic for ordinary government in extraordinary times and the more general literature on resistance and everyday life which has inspired it. The second section ‘sets the stage’ for the empirical discussion by providing an introduction to the context of ordinary government in extraordinary times in Nepal. In the third section I describe three examples of tactical government (‘absent presence’, persuasion, and ‘rule talk’), illustrating them with vignettes drawn from the everyday practice of local civil servants. In the fourth section I explore the pursuit of other (culturally informed) projects as a complementary form of practice. I return to the three examples of ‘absent presence’, persuasion, and ‘rule talk’, highlighting additional insights into authorization processes that can be gained from this perspective.

The analysis in this article is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with local civil servants in rural areas of five different hill districts in Nepal between 2009–2013.¹¹ These interviews are complemented by insights gained during ‘job shadowing’ two different local civil servants (an agriculture extension worker and a local government secretary), as well as several weeks of participant observation and ‘hanging out’ in a particular locality in Surkhet district between 2010–2013. During the later fieldwork phases I lived in the homes of two different political leaders, thus affording me the opportunity to observe the many informal interactions and the behind the scenes organizational work conducted by both local politicians and civil servants between important meetings. As my fieldwork started in 2009, information about how local civil servants managed in earlier times (particularly during the war) is based on their own recollections and their recounting of these.

While my conceptual reflections are based on these empirical settings, the empirical results in themselves should not be taken as representative of every local civil servant in Nepal. Rather, their working conditions, and responses to them, vary considerably. Indeed, even to speak about civil servants involves a certain elision and generalization regarding the many different civil service functions that occur at the local level. I am aware that the nature of the function of a local government secretary is somewhat different from that of line ministry representatives such as agriculture extension workers. However, my focus here is on the common dilemmas they

¹¹ Dolakha, Okhaldunga, Ramechhap, Salyan, and Surkhet.

face, particularly when it comes to claiming and maintaining the authority to make decisions about the distribution of public resources, whether agricultural inputs or local government budgets.

Encountering tactical government and bureaucratic authority

On authority

The basic question this article sets out to answer is about how processes of authorization work in practice. Specifically, I am interested in how local civil servants claim (and produce) the authority to govern in an 'ordinary extraordinary' context of permanent transition and contested authority. But how does one actually encounter authority? I use 'claims to authority' here to denote that authority is not something that one or another actor naturally possesses, but is rather 'a relation that requires continual renewal'.¹² In his influential definition, Max Weber refers to authority as 'an instance of power that implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience'.¹³ But this begs the practical question: how is voluntary compliance ensured? Through what means does a person produce the authority to give orders? Analytically speaking, how does one grasp or observe something so contingent, so tenuous, and yet so effective?

One way in which authority is made visible is in decision-making processes about access to resources. Thus my strategy to expose the processes through which authority is produced is to interrogate the role of resource control in re/producing relations of power and authority. In a context where the authority to decide over resource control is contested, exercising the role of decision-maker or influencer is one way to produce authority. As Thomas Sikor and Christian Lund suggest, the power to control the resource and the power to grant recognition are, through a sort of contract in which each legitimates the other, rendered authoritative.¹⁴ Therefore, legitimacy is key to

¹² A. J. Nightingale and H. R. Ojha, 'Rethinking Power and Authority: Symbolic Violence and Subjectivity in Nepal's Terai Forests', *Development and Change* 44, no. 1 (2013), p. 30.

¹³ M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), p. 213.

¹⁴ T. Sikor and C. Lund, 'Access and Property: A Question of Power and Authority', *Development and Change* 40, no. 1 (2009).

producing, justifying, and consolidating authority, and, in a Weberian analysis, a ‘legitimizing value system furnishes the final and basic distinguishing criterion of authority’.¹⁵

Thus our analysis must build both on insights into the rationalities and norms that inform the actions of individuals and on information about concrete practices. The latter, as I have suggested elsewhere, can be usefully conceptualized in terms of ‘repertoires of legitimation’ that consist of a series of legitimacy-claiming performances.¹⁶ Analysing authority is thus about interpreting the relationships between norms and practices, and between and among different actors, as these change over time and between different places.

While effectively controlling decisions about resource use, and the authority to do so, may reinforce each other, these roles do not inherently adhere to any particular actor, especially in a context as much in flux as wartime and post-war Nepal. Local civil servants face challenges in claiming or maintaining the authority to decide about the use and distribution of resources, particularly in a local governance arena highly influenced by Maoist People’s Governments during the war, or a patronage-and-performance resurgence of local politicians in the post-war years.¹⁷ In this article, I argue that a combination of tactical government and alternative projects are mobilized by local civil servants to create the conditions of possibility for bureaucratic authority (including the condition of legitimacy). This approach serves both to provide depth to the analytical categories of practice ‘patronage’ and ‘performance’ defined in the Introduction to this special issue, and to complement these categories with a consideration of other, differently sourced, motivations.¹⁸

¹⁵ P. M. Blau, ‘Critical Remarks on Weber’s Theory of Authority’, *The American Political Science Review* 57, no. 2 (1963), p. 307.

¹⁶ S. Byrne, ‘Becoming a Contender: Legitimacy, Authority and the Power of “Making do” in Nepal’s Permanent Transition’, PhD thesis, University of Zurich, 2015.

¹⁷ See K. Ogura, ‘Maoist People’s Governments 2001–2005: The Power in Wartime’, in *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratisation in Nepal and its Neighbours*, (eds) D. N. Gellner and K. Hachhethu (Delhi: Sage, 2008); P. Manandhar, ‘Strategies for Change: A Case Study of a Maoist-Run Village’, in *In Hope and Fear: Living Through the People’s War in Nepal*, (eds) P. Manandhar and D. Seddon (Delhi: Adroit, 2010); S. Shneiderman and M. Turin, ‘Negotiating Nepal’s Two Polities: A View from Dolakha’, in *In Hope and Fear*, (eds) Manandhar and Seddon; S. Byrne and B. Klem, ‘Constructing Legitimacy in Post-War Transition: The Return of “Normal” Politics in Nepal and Sri Lanka?’, *Geoforum* 66 (2015).

¹⁸ B. Suykens and B. Klem, ‘The Politics of Order and Disturbance: Public Authority, Sovereignty, and Violent Contestation in South Asia’ in this special issue.

On local civil servants and studying 'the state'

In his landmark 1995 article, Akhil Gupta suggests that an analysis of the everyday practices of local bureaucracies, and what lower level officials actually do, is key to studying the state.¹⁹ This article is intended as a contribution to the growing body of literature analysing processes of state formation and the production of fragmented public authority in South Asia through the lens of the civil service and bureaucratic practices.²⁰ Civil servants are uniquely placed in governmental processes. At the same time representatives of the state *and* members of the public, they are both here and there: 'they are the public and the government, they are the participants and the resisters, and they produce both the orderly and the tactical. Because of this precarious location, civil servants offer tremendous insight into the ways that government is able to do its work.'²¹ Having a foot in both 'society' and 'the state', thereby straddling this most blurred of barriers, makes civil servants uniquely relevant actors for analysing the relationship between the two. Indeed, as Michael Herzfeld has argued, explorations of bureaucratic practice have tended to underestimate bureaucrats' complicity with local populations, with whom they may share a 'common cultural matrix of forms of collusion'.²² The cultural aspect is also highlighted by Andrea Nightingale and Hemant Ojha, who suggest that cultural codes related to caste, class, gender, feudalism, techno-bureaucratism, and development are significant in

¹⁹ A. Gupta, 'Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State', *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995); see also A. Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

²⁰ See, among others, *ibid.*; M. S. Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); B. Klem, 'In the Eye of the Storm: Sri Lanka's Front-Line Civil Servants in Transition', *Development and Change* 43, no. 3 (2012); Nightingale and Ojha, 'Rethinking Power'; J. Pfaff-Czarnecka, 'Distributional Coalitions in Nepal: An Essay on Democratization, Capture and a (Lack of) Confidence', in *Local Democracy in South Asia*, (eds) Gellner and Hachhethu.

²¹ Feldman, 'Everyday Government', p. 868.

²² M. Herzfeld, 'Political Optics and the Occlusion of Intimate Knowledge', *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005), p. 373; see also M. Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

processes of authorization.²³ These cultural codes underlie, explicitly or implicitly, various claims to authority.

This is even more so the case in a context like Nepal, where state formation has been contested²⁴ and—significantly—local civil servants cannot necessarily assume authority merely by being representatives of the state. When coupled with the (at least theoretical) control over the distribution of (some) public resources and provision of services, it makes for an awkward positionality that is highly interesting for our present analysis. This article aims to contribute to deepening our understanding of what civil servants—those at this most crucial interface between citizens and the state—actually do and, critically, how they get things done.

On tactical government

The analytical approach we start from is based on the work of Ilana Feldman. In several of her writings, Feldman explores the governmental practices of maintaining functional rule in extraordinary conditions.²⁵ Her work explores the everyday and mundane practices of bureaucracy and examines how civil servants faced the challenge of governing without stability, in governmental regimes that were explicitly temporary. Specifically, Feldman's work uncovers how bureaucratic authority becomes possible. This authorization was achieved, she argues, through the regularity of repetitive bureaucracy and the mobility of tactical practice. With respect to the former, in Feldman's analysis, 'it was the repetitions of filing procedures, the accumulation of documents, and the habits of civil servants that produced the conditions of possibility for authority'.²⁶ These repetitions produced a predictability and constancy in a government that otherwise could rely on little of either.

²³ Nightingale and Ojha, 'Rethinking Power'. On the influence of cultural norms on bureaucratic practice in Nepal, see I. Jamil and R. Dangal, 'The State of Bureaucratic Representativeness and Administrative Culture in Nepal', *Contemporary South Asia* 17, no. 2 (2009).

²⁴ See, for example, D. N. Gellner (ed.), *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007).

²⁵ Feldman, 'Everyday Government'; Feldman, *Governing Gaza*; I. Feldman, 'Government Without Expertise? Competence, Capacity, and Civil-Service Practice in Gaza, 1917–67', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 4 (2005).

²⁶ Feldman, *Governing Gaza*, p. 3; see also Gupta, *Red Tape*; and Hull, *Government of Paper*.

The second condition of possibility for authority identified by Feldman, and the one we work with here, is what she conceptualizes as tactical government. This is 'a means of governing that shifts in response to crisis, that often works without long-term planning, and that presumes little stability in governing conditions . . . It was this practice that contributed to the tenacity of government, despite its instabilities.'²⁷ Tactical government is a deliberately restricted mode of rule that makes limited claims and adapts to changing circumstances and continuous crises rather than engaging in strategic planning. In other words, tactical government is a kind of short-term coping mechanism for dealing with a political context characterized by fundamental insecurity at various levels.

The notion of tactical government draws on the writing of Michel de Certeau, specifically on the distinction between *tactics*, which he suggests are the realm of action of the weak, and *strategies*, which he sees as the realm of action available to the strong.²⁸ With tactics thus conceptualized as the responsive mechanism of the weak, their application to an entity such as a government seems incongruous at first. Feldman cautions that,

to call government tactical, though, is not to say that it does not exercise power over persons, but rather to note its distinctive style of operation. The difference is not about degrees of purposefulness, aggressiveness or meaningfulness in governmental practice . . . The distinction, rather, has to do with scale of action, scope of imagination, range of planning and stability of resources.²⁹

Tactics, thus conceptualized, are eminently *responsive* actions. In Feldman's use of the concept, tactical practices are employed by a somewhat powerful entity, but one that has a very limited scope for action. The use of 'tactical' when referring to a governmental practice, therefore, aims to 'distinguish it from forms of strategic government that utilize long-range planning, comprehensive analysis, and relatively coherent policies as the mechanisms of rule'.³⁰

Extending de Certeau's focus on tactics employed by ordinary people, consumers, and so on, Feldman suggest that tactical government is a form of practice that may be employed by actors that

²⁷ Feldman, *Governing Gaza*, p. 3.

²⁸ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

²⁹ Feldman, *Governing Gaza*, p. 18.

³⁰ Feldman, 'Everyday Government', p. 880.

claim power even as they are faced with ongoing crises and temporal insecurity. Thus it is a form of practice that is not only focused on resistance (as in de Certeau), but which can be used to claim and maintain authority. While it is productive (of authority), tactical government is most significantly characterized as a deliberately restricted mode of rule and one that operates in a relatively ad hoc way, responding to situations as they emerge.

Local government: continuities in permanent transition

This section provides a brief introduction to the overlapping spheres of civil service and local government in which local civil servants work. As, at the time of writing, Nepal had not had local elections in almost 20 years, local civil servants were made responsible for a wide range of local government decisions. In addition to their day-to-day jobs as service providers, 'paper stampers', and distributors of resources, they are active players in the most recent iteration of Nepal's ongoing experiment with different forms of local government. In this section we briefly outline these dual roles, before turning to considerations of how they are played out in the next section.

As with the rest of the state, the public administration of Nepal has undergone a series of transformations since the first establishment of democracy and a 'modern' bureaucracy in 1951. With this change in the political system, the role of the administration also changed. Public service delivery and promoting development became important tasks for an administration which, until that point, had functioned mainly to collect taxes and maintain order.³¹ In this sense, Nepal is quite different from other South Asian countries with their long and well-established bureaucratic traditions inherited from the period of British rule. The public administration of Nepal has continued to evolve alongside the political changes that have marked the period between 1950 and the present. Throughout this period the state expanded its presence and role as resource distributor and service provider, while bureaucrats strengthened their role as gatekeepers.³²

In addition to the civil service, the system of local government in Nepal has undergone several transformations and significant periods

³¹ R. Burghart, *The Conditions of Listening*, (eds) C. J. Fuller and J. Spencer (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Pfaff-Czarnecka, 'Distributional'.

³² Pfaff-Czarnecka, 'Distributional'.

of ostensibly temporary situations in recent decades. From 1961–1990, Nepal was ruled through a ‘partyless’ Panchayat system of government. Lok Raj Baral has characterized the post-1961 period as one of political ambivalence and ad hocism, with the Panchayat system sold as a temporary phase on the road to fully fledged democracy.³³ In 1990, following a massive People’s Movement, multiparty democracy was reintroduced and local government elections were held in 1991 and 1997. The early 1990s were a period characterized by ‘high expectations and deep disappointment’, one of several factors that contributed to the outbreak of a Maoist People’s War in 1996.³⁴ By 2002, the Maoists controlled large parts of the countryside and established their own People’s Governments. A second People’s Movement in 2006 re-established democracy and a Comprehensive Peace Agreement ended the war in the same year. The Interim Constitution of 2007 declared Nepal a federal republic, and two Constituent Assemblies were elected (in 2008 and 2013) to draft a new federal, democratic Constitution. The post-2007 moment has been labelled ‘transitional’ during which the political system and distribution of powers are being negotiated. For almost 12 years after the end of the war, and 20 years after the last local elections, institutions at the local level were somewhat ‘on hold’ while the broader constitutional framework was discussed. A number of temporary ‘transitional’ measures were instituted to fill the gap until such time as the federal Constitution was drafted and local elections were held.³⁵ As Heather Hindman notes, the provisional has become long term.³⁶ Thus the trend of ad hoc, makeshift, and ostensibly temporary solutions that Baral identified continues to be evident. The extraordinary has indeed become ordinary.

³³ Baral, *Oppositional Politics in Nepal*.

³⁴ J. Pfaff-Czarnecka, ‘High Expectations, Deep Disappointment: Politics, State and Society in Nepal after 1990’, in *Himalayan ‘People’s War’: Nepal’s Maoist Rebellion*, (ed.) M. Hutt (London: Hurst & Company, 2004).

³⁵ Nepal’s new federal Constitution was promulgated in September 2015 and local elections were held in three phases in May, June, and September 2017. As these momentous events occurred after this article was written, they are not addressed here. The effect of the re-establishment of elected local governments on bureaucratic authority claims and practices is a topic that warrants research, as is the relationship of the latest transition—to a federal state structure—to the broader framing of ‘permanent transition’.

³⁶ H. Hindman, ‘Post-Political in the Post-Conflict: DIY Capitalism, Anarcho-Neoliberalism and Nepal’s Ungovernable Mountains’, *Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology* March (2014).

Local civil servants are appointed through central government ministries and then assigned to certain local governments. At the time of writing, Nepal's Local Self Governance Act (1999) referred to three main levels of 'local bodies'—village development committees (in rural areas), municipalities (in urban areas), and district development committees.³⁷ In this article we focus on civil servants assigned to the village development committee (VDC) level of governance. At the level of the VDC, the central government appoints and pays a category of staff under the Civil Service Act and Rules, including VDC secretaries, some accountants, and technical staff. These are central government staff who can be deployed anywhere in Nepal. VDCs may also directly hire their own support staff locally, with their salaries paid through local revenues.

Additionally, a number of other civil servants are employed through different sectoral ministries, working in the fields of agriculture, health, education, veterinary service, irrigation, and so on. Civil servants in rural areas operate through 'service centres' in the case of livestock and agriculture or through schools and health centres. They may work in one or several VDCs (with one service centre being responsible for a number of VDCs) and are responsible to their Ministry through its district office, rather than to a local government.

Since the term of the former elected local governments ended in 2002, those in charge of the agriculture extension office and occupying the health post, along with the VDC secretary, were mandated to make decisions for the local government until such time as new local elections were able to be held. In practice the main responsibility fell to the VDC secretary, with the other two civil servants providing more-or-less active support. However, local civil servants did not step into a political vacuum. Many local politicians, particularly those from elite families and traditional/conservative political parties, were keen to reclaim the political space they had abdicated during the war, and to participate in the distribution of the ever-growing volume of funds being channelled to the local level. As an interim measure to integrate local politicians within decision-making processes, in 2007 the national government directed the creation of an All-Party Mechanism (APM) at VDC and district levels. This Mechanism was officially disbanded in the face of widespread allegations of corruption

³⁷ Nepal's 2015 Constitution restructured and renamed the units of local government. In this article, all references are to the pre-2015 structures.

(leading to the moniker ‘ATM’).³⁸ Nevertheless, APMs continued to operate unofficially.

Three practices of tactical government

We turn now to analysing three concrete practices of tactical government. I have labelled these ‘absent presence’, persuasion, and ‘rule talk’. These practices are eminently tactical—ad hoc, makeshift, opportunistic—ways of creating conditions of possibility for bureaucratic authority. By being an ‘absent presence’ in their assigned locality, local civil servants purposefully limit the scope of their authority to one that can be maintained. They mobilize persuasion by seizing opportunities to get things done, often leveraging their own and others’ authority in the process. When persuasion is not successful, local civil servants resort to ‘rule talk’ in an attempt to order competing claims. These practices are not discrete categories and they can be drawn upon in a variety of ways to express differing positions and claims. The description of each of these practices is accompanied by an example drawn from my empirical data.

‘Absent presence’

The notion of ‘absent presence’ highlights the contradictory tension within experiences of a state that is simultaneously absent and present in the lives of its citizens.³⁹ While the state’s presence may be experienced most often through its perceived absence and inaccessibility, it may nevertheless continue to play an important role. For example, in the case of a community of Muslim weavers in India, Philippa Williams notes that ‘on the one hand, Muslim Ansāris articulated their discontent with a biased and largely inaccessible state, which they saw little point interacting with. On the other hand, they acknowledged the inescapable reality that the state did offer

³⁸ The practice of local government in the post-war years has been characterized as ‘consensual corruption’ and collusion. Allegations of corruption appear regularly in the media and public discourse, and such allegations were also related by my informants. However, I do not have any direct evidence of this.

³⁹ The term is encountered in Herzfeld, ‘Absent Presence’; Williams, ‘Absent Presence’.

various forms of potential support and opportunities for strategic engagement...'.⁴⁰ In other words, people seek to be both legible and illegible to the state, to be seen and unseen by it, as the state itself is also both seen and unseen.

This tension between absence and presence, between being seen and unseen, is a useful entry point for exploring practices of hiding/secretcy and absenteeism among local civil servants in rural Nepal. These two interrelated practices are part of how local civil servants adapt to their working conditions and claim authority. The practice of hiding or secrecy was characteristic of the local civil service in rural areas during the war. Due to the insecurity of rural areas, and the pressure placed upon them by Maoist forces, many civil servants retreated to the relative safety of the district headquarters where they stayed for the duration of the conflict. Thus although absent from rural areas, the representatives of the state were present, albeit in hiding, in the district headquarters (or even as far afield as Kathmandu).⁴¹ Citizens who wanted to avail themselves of a service provided by a civil servant, or who wanted to receive a pension or other disbursement they were entitled to, were obliged to travel to the district headquarters. This trip often meant passing through checkpoints operated by both the Maoist fighters and the state security services.

The situation of hiding and secrecy was particularly challenging for civil servants who were local to the place where they were posted.⁴² In some of these cases, civil servants preferred to stay in their home areas rather than move to district headquarters, even though doing so placed them under tremendous pressure. One such person, who is in charge of the local Agriculture Service Centre and whom I will call Mohan Bahadur KC, recounted some of the tactics he adopted in order to maintain his personal safety and continue providing the mandated services to farmers. He believes that the Maoists allowed him to continue working because the programmes implemented by the

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 275.

⁴¹ On states' remarkable potency, despite absence, see M. Nielsen, 'Filling in the Blanks: The Potency of Fragmented Imageries of the State', *Review of African Political Economy* 34, no. 114 (2007).

⁴² Although the civil service serves the whole of Nepal, and civil servants can technically be posted anywhere, many prefer to try to obtain a posting either close to their home or in a place where it is relatively comfortable to live. Those who are posted in their home villages are also the most likely to be regularly present and thus accessible to citizens.

Agriculture Service Centre directly support farmers.⁴³ Nevertheless, along with the other government employees who remained in rural areas, he was required to hand over 5 per cent of his salary to the Maoists, as well as his gun; these 'donations' greatly facilitated his ability to work in the area. He was cautioned to maintain a low profile and considered it prudent to hide from the Maoists if their paths happened to cross while he was out distributing seeds or fertilizer to the farmers.

Following the destruction of the Agriculture Service Centre office, presumably by the Maoists, he decided to move the seeds and fertilizer to the nearby home of the Centre's office assistant. Throughout the rest of the war, farmers were informed by word of mouth when new seeds and fertilizer were available and went to pick them up from the office assistant's home. The day when the resources would be made available was not announced publically and farmers were only informed at very short notice, in order to prevent the resources being confiscated. In this case, although the state employee hid only occasionally, state-provided resources were kept hidden more permanently. Hiding the resources, I suggest, was a tactic Mohan Bahadur and his colleagues used to maintain their authority to distribute public resources (seeds and fertilizer). However limited in quantity and poor in quality the seeds and fertilizer were, the delivery of this much-needed input continued and was carried out by representatives of the state. Had the seeds been confiscated and redistributed by the Maoists (as many other resources were), Mohan Bahadur and colleagues would no longer have had a role in making decisions about the use of this resource. Hiding them was thus a tactic to assert authority discreetly and resist Maoist attempts to appropriate or destroy the resources.

With the exception of local people like Mohan Bahadur, many civil servants abandoned their posts in rural areas during the war for security reasons and this trend has continued in the post-war years. Absenteeism means that a VDC secretary or other local civil servant are not regularly present at their post in the VDC, and such cases are widely reported. A 2011 study found that 40 per cent of VDC secretaries were providing services from their VDC headquarters, 36

⁴³ On such 'informal cooperation', see N. Terpstra and G. Frerks, 'Governance Practices and Symbolism: De Facto Sovereignty and Public Authority in "Tigerland"' in this special issue; A. Shah, 'Markets of Protection: The "Terrorist" Maoist Movement and the State in Jharkhand, India', *Critique of Anthropology* 26, no. 3 (2006).

per cent provided services from the district headquarters, and 24 per cent were either permanently absent or positions were vacant.⁴⁴ More recent figures, cited in a recent article in *The Kathmandu Post*, suggest that only one-quarter of VDC secretaries are currently providing services out of their designated offices.⁴⁵ Where civil servants are consistently absent, communities face serious difficulties in accessing the already fairly limited basic services that the state is mandated to provide. People who want a service from a VDC secretary have to travel to their location, and find a time when they are not attending meetings or training. However, basic services are provided by VDC office support staff, who are generally present in the VDC office (as they are locals) and act as go-betweens. As support staff do not have the authority to sign official documents, some VDC secretaries have taken the initiative and provided their staff with pre-signed forms to facilitate the process.⁴⁶

There are many reasons for absenteeism among local civil servants, including perceptions of security threats and difficult living conditions in remote and rural VDCs. Furthermore, many VDC offices were destroyed during the war, so the basic office infrastructure as well as records no longer exist. Many VDC offices continue to be housed in temporary locations, which can include rented spaces or spaces borrowed from other public institutions, such as schools. Agitating political factions regularly padlock VDC offices, rendering them inaccessible.⁴⁷ Finally, there continue to be many cases where a VDC secretary who is responsible for two or three different VDCs claims to be more available to all VDC citizens by staying in the district headquarters rather than moving between the three VDCs. Similar factors also affect other local civil servants.

Like Mohan Bahadur hiding seeds, I suggest that absenteeism can—in some cases—be a rather counter-intuitive tactic to claim authority. Both the ‘absent presence’ practices of hiding and absenteeism can

⁴⁴ Inlogos, *Assessment of Village Development Committee Governance and the Use of Block Grants* (Kathmandu: Ministry of Local Development and the United Nations Development Programme, 2009).

⁴⁵ B. Sharma, ‘Quake Victims Facing Hard Time: Absence of VDC Secys Paralysing Local Govt’, *The Kathmandu Post*, 20 December 2015.

⁴⁶ UNRHCO, *Empirical Case-Study of Vdc Secretary Absenteeism and Related Service Delivery in 45 Vdcs in Rural Nepal*, Field Bulletin (Kathmandu: United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator’s Office Nepal, 2011).

⁴⁷ New ERA, *Preliminary Findings of Baseline—Vdc Secretary Survey Conducted in 15 Pran Program Districts* (Kathmandu: Program for Accountability in Nepal, World Bank, 2016).

appear at the outset as civil servants renouncing their authority to govern and leaving the people to their own devices. However, I would like to suggest that they can also be considered as ways to produce or maintain authority, albeit of a very limited nature. Being present, either during the war or afterwards, would have entailed staking a claim to local public authority and entering into competition with other authority claimants—either the Maoist ‘parallel’ governmental authorities during the war, or local political leaders in the post-war period. In both cases, this is generally not a competition that a local civil servant could win. Had Mohan Bahadur tried to distribute seeds and fertilizer openly, he would have risked his life and what he was trying to distribute would have been confiscated.

By being an ‘absent presence’, local civil servants reduce the scope of their claim to authority. But the resulting more modest claim is one that can be maintained. Rather than attempting to take on the vast scope of authority that has been assigned to them, with ad interim responsibility for local government, many VDC secretaries choose to step back and leave the rough and tumble of local politics. By being generally absent, but showing up selectively for important events, they legitimate their claim to authority on the grounds of being a distinguished visitor.⁴⁸ Accepting that the state cannot maintain a monopoly on the exercise of public authority (or, in some cases, even compete successfully), by their absence civil servants restrict themselves to a relatively limited scope of authority and avoid contestations with other authority claimants. Indeed, one VDC secretary explained the scope of his authority to me in exactly these terms: ‘there is no other option than to co-ordinate with the community. There will be no monopoly.’⁴⁹

Persuasion

The second condition of possibility for bureaucratic authority I would like to explore is persuasion through convincing and leveraging. These two related aspects of persuasion are key to how local civil servants get things done, although they are more essential to VDC secretaries

⁴⁸ On the authority of visitors, see R. Burghart, ‘His Lordship at the Cobblers’ Well’, in *An Anthropological Critique of Development: The Growth of Ignorance*, (ed.) M. Hobart (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁹ Interview, 12 July 2013.

mandated with decision-making power than to other civil servants mandated 'only' with service delivery. In practice, VDC secretaries have very little power over local leaders and if they want them to do something (or not do something) they have to use their powers of persuasion to convince the leaders. This is the route taken by those VDC secretaries who seek a more 'present presence' of their authority in the locality where they have been posted. Rather than contesting the authority of local politicians, they try to get them on board with the project they would like to implement, or to bring them around to a similar way of seeing things.

Strong powers of persuasion and ability to 'bend' things to their will mean that a VDC secretary is perceived to be someone who can get things done and who can 'bring' development to the VDC. Thus when a VDC secretary convinces local politicians to support a project he has proposed or to adapt their proposals to the government's rules and guidelines, his claim to authority is bolstered.⁵⁰ In this way, the VDC secretary does not compete with other authority claimants, but tries to get them on board with his proposal. Similarly, VDC secretaries can leverage the authority of other actors, such as NGOs or locally respected persons, by ensuring their support for the project. In this way, their authority contributes to the production of his. Finally, as the case below illustrates, VDC secretaries can leverage their own authority to ensure the effective implementation of a project that will expand the scope of their authority.

One such initiative can be seen in relation to the ambition of a secretary of a VDC called Kamthola (pseudonym) to achieve the distinction of being an 'open defecation free' VDC. This title is granted when every home in the village has a toilet and it is perceived to be a mark of development. According to 2011 census data, 38 per cent of households in Nepal do not have a toilet.⁵¹ Having secured the enthusiastic support of the local political leaders, the VDC secretary was convinced that a strong incentive would be needed to ensure that people would construct the required infrastructure. The VDC secretary and political leaders decided that VDC services would no

⁵⁰ Of the 3,915 VDC secretary positions, just 0.02 per cent are occupied by women. New ERA, *VDC Secretary Survey*.

⁵¹ Central Bureau of Statistics, *National Population and Housing Census 2011* (Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics, National Planning Commission Secretariat, 2012). On the politics of open defecation, see R. Desai et al., 'The Politics of Open Defecation: Informality, Body, and Infrastructure in Mumbai', *Antipode* 47, no. 1 (2015).

longer be available to those who did not build or possess the required sanitation facilities. People who constructed a toilet would be given a special document and this would be necessary to obtain a birth certificate, marriage certificate, citizenship certificate, or any of the host of other documents and references the VDC is legally required to provide citizens.⁵² Evidently this threat was effective as Kamthola officially became an 'open defecation free' VDC in 2012, an occasion marked with a parade, speeches, and much fanfare. As the champion of this initiative, the VDC secretary received high praise at this event and his important role in achieving this marker of development (and the corresponding financial reward from the government) was recognized.

The case of the 'toilet conditionality' is an interesting one because the VDC secretary leveraged his field of clear authority—the documents and references he provides—to ensure the implementation of a project that was important to him. Although he is often unable (or unwilling) to ensure the strict implementation of the central government's rules (see below), in this instance he played a key role in inventing and enforcing a new local rule. As the VDC secretary and the political leaders were all agreed on the importance of this initiative, their combined authority ensured its implementation. The use of persuading, convincing, and leveraging is also interesting because of the extent to which it is very opportunity-based. The bolstering of a local civil servant's authority through persuading other authority claimants to form a coalition is not a general practice but a tactic that depends on seizing opportunities where conditions are favourable. In the above case, the authority of the civil service was leveraged, and aligned with local political will, to implement a local policy decision. But local civil servants do not necessarily generally and continuously seek to build such coalitions or to implement ambitious projects. They do not claim to be generally responsible for the development of the VDC, even though this responsibility has been assigned to them by the central government. Rather their claim is more opportunistic, selective, and ad hoc.

⁵² The conditionality was also extended to other areas, for example eligibility to have a tap from a government-sponsored drinking water scheme placed near one's house. This practice of making the provision of local public services conditional on the construction of a toilet has been observed in other parts of Nepal as well (Interview, 12 March 2013).

'Rule talk'

The third condition of possibility of bureaucratic authority that I would like to address in this article is 'rule talk'. My use of this term is inspired by Nuijten and Lorenzo's article on land property relations in a peasant community in Peru.⁵³ They suggest that the legal discourses people draw on to explain property relations are 'rule talk' which seeks to justify a particular set of relations, rather than reflect the system of property rights. Nuijten and Lorenzo understand 'rule talk' as 'the ways in which people claim rights to land, frame their explanations of property relations in normative terms, and express themselves about categories of villagers with different privileges and obligations'.⁵⁴ They suggest that 'rule talk', like storytelling more generally, is a discursive practice that serves as a way to order the world, and provide explanations and justifications. In this sense, 'rule talk' is both performative and productive.

Thus far we have explored how local civil servants both self-consciously limit the scope of their claim to authority and, when seeking to expand it, use persuasion and leveraging to build a supportive coalition. However, there are many cases where local civil servants feel they cannot step back from claiming authority and where their powers of persuasion are not effective. In these cases I suggest that they make recourse to 'rule talk' as a way to claim authority. But this is a compromised kind of 'rule talk' in the sense that it is used to practically adapt what is actually written in guidelines, laws, and rules.⁵⁵ The following comment made by a VDC secretary is a striking example of such 'rule talk' and indicates the importance of things appearing to be done by the rules:

We are recruited by the state to follow the rules set by government. If they [local politicians] bring things that are in line with the rules and guidelines, we heartily welcome it. If things come a little different than the rules, then we suggest to minimize it and bend it in a way that it comes under the policy. We work in a way that a little bit of amendment is done in their [politicians'] side and from our side rules are followed.⁵⁶

⁵³ Nuijten and Lorenzo, 'Ruling by Record'.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵⁵ S. Byrne and G. Shrestha, 'A Compromising Consensus? Legitimising Local Government in Post-Conflict Nepal', *International Development Planning Review* 36, no. 4 (2014).

⁵⁶ Focus group discussion with VDC secretaries, 12 July 2013.

In the case of the everyday practice of local civil servants in Nepal, I think that 'rule talk' can also be understood as a way of producing order out of the somewhat chaotic world of post-war local politics. While instances of 'rule talk' abound, they are particularly salient when it comes to the distribution of the local government budget. This is both highly contested and highly regulated. At the VDC level, grants from the central government make up the major part of the budget and have increased significantly in recent years. Officially, disbursement of the VDC block grant follows a rather comprehensive local planning process involving multiple consultations and a participatory decision-making body which includes representatives of political parties, NGOs, and disadvantaged groups. The amount of the grant is partially based on performance according to a series of minimum conditions and performance measures, and a certain percentage of the budget is to be set aside for disadvantaged groups, capacity building, and so on. The process and criteria are outlined in comprehensive grant mobilization guidelines and manuals provided by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development and the multi-donor programme that contributes to the VDC grant.

One significant area of compromise is the portion of the budget that the guidelines stipulate should be allocated to disadvantaged groups.⁵⁷ How rules are talked about in this context, and the 'spin' that is put on alternative interpretations, shows how 'rule talk' can be used by more powerful actors to disadvantage others, while maintaining a facade of legality. Maintaining this facade seems to be particularly important to local civil servants' claims to authority. According to the guidelines in force at the time of writing, some 35 per cent of the top-up grant provided by the multi-donor fund should be set aside for members of disadvantaged groups to invest according to (what they consider to be) their priorities.⁵⁸ However, these funds are very often reallocated to different projects through a range of different justifications. I was often told that the money belongs to those who speak. And even if you do speak up, you have to do it in the right way, as the following incident indicates: the development of the village profile⁵⁹ in one VDC was funded partly by the budget that had been allocated for people with

⁵⁷ On this issue, see also Byrne and Shrestha, 'A Compromising Consensus'.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* This is broken down as follows: 10 per cent for women, 10 per cent for children/youth, and 15 per cent for other disadvantaged groups (such as Dalits, indigenous groups, differently abled people).

⁵⁹ The village profile is a piece of public relations material particularly useful to local civil servants and politicians.

disabilities. As the latter group had not presented a project proposal in the required format, the funds that had been earmarked for them were reallocated. This was met with protest, but in the absence of a project proposal (the rules in this case being adhered to rather strictly), the decision was made to divert the funds to the village profile. This is one of several examples of what Herzfeld has characterized as ‘bureaucrats themselves tweaking the system by following its rules to mischievous excess’.⁶⁰

Such situations present a challenge for VDC secretaries, who are responsible for ensuring the implementation of the budget distribution guidelines. As one VDC secretary explained: ‘it is difficult to implement the guidelines. The community has different demands and expectations. This year we tried to follow maximum 70 per cent of the guidelines and in doing so I was criticized by the whole community.’⁶¹ The extent to which VDC secretaries are willing to compromise the budget allocations, and to which they overlook or collude in ‘creative redistribution’, depends on a number of different factors, including the relative balance of power between the VDC secretary and local political leaders, and the degree of unity among the local political leaders. The role of violence, whether actual or ‘spectral’—transmitted through rumours, tales, and reputations—should not be overlooked.⁶²

Though challenges remain, extended assessments of the ‘political space’ at the local level conducted by the Carter Center conclude that this space was mostly or partly free and that decisions in local development bodies were generally taken through consensus and without major conflict.⁶³ As consensus is the dominant decision-making paradigm in post-war Nepal, discussions about budget allocation continue until such time as all of the decision-makers in the

⁶⁰ Herzfeld, ‘Political Optics’, p. 369. See also Gupta on ‘processualism’: A. Gupta, ‘Messy Bureaucracies’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013).

⁶¹ Interview, 17 March 2012b.

⁶² T. B. Hansen and F. Stepputat, ‘Introduction’, in *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, (eds) T. B. Hansen and F. Stepputat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 4. On political violence in Nepal, see B. Gautam, ‘Locating Violence in Nepali Politics’, in *Ruptures and Repairs in South Asia: Historical Perspectives*, (ed.) Y. Raj (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2013); J. Whelpton, ‘Political Violence in Nepal from Unification to Janandolan I: The Background to “People’s War”’, in *Revolution in Nepal: An Anthropological and Historical Approach to the People’s War*, (ed.) M. Lecomte-Tilouine (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶³ Carter Center, *Political Transition Monitoring in Nepal, 2009–2014: Final Report* (Kathmandu: The Carter Center, 2014).

room can be brought to an agreement. This process entails significant negotiation and, often, compromise. The ability to get things done—in this case to agree on the distribution of the VDC budget—depends on compromise. The rules in this case are used by VDC secretaries as a powerful bargaining tool. The negotiation of the 70/30 split mentioned in the quote above represents a significant authority claim by the VDC secretary, justified in terms of 'the guidelines'.

Beyond tactics: alternative approaches

Agency as power and agency as projects

At first sight, the practices of 'absent presence', persuasion and 'rule talk' appear eminently tactical. They are about short-term manoeuvring, seizing opportunities, and adapting to changing political dynamics. The scope of authority claimed and produced through these practices is purposively limited and only expands conditionally, opportunistically, and on a case-by-case basis. The fragmented nature of authority in Nepal means that the authority claim of local civil servants is always relative to that of other claimants—particularly of the Maoist 'parallel' governmental authorities during the war and local political leaders subsequently. On their own, local civil servants are not often in a position to openly contest the authority claims of other actors. Rarely, when a VDC secretary is very experienced and has served for a long time in their own VDC or district, they will have sufficient political capital to set the agenda and engage in open contestation. A recent survey of 293 VDC secretaries found that more than a third had been in their assigned VDC for less than a year, which gives some indication of their position.⁶⁴ Local civil servants can be somewhat isolated in their working area and may fear the consequences in terms of their personal safety of too open a contestation of local political leaders' authority.

While I find tactical government a useful concept, I think it tells only one part of the story. The dichotomization between strategic and tactical practices proposed by de Certeau and used by Feldman (among others) certainly has problematic aspects. These are tied up with critiques of the dichotomization of domination and resistance

⁶⁴ New ERA, *VDC Secretary Survey*.

as separate forms of power, which have been detailed extensively elsewhere.⁶⁵ Nevertheless this distinction can do useful work, by serving the analytical function of highlighting different kinds of agency. I would like to take this reflection on different kinds of agency one step further and devote the rest of this section to a conceptual move that I think provides useful alternative and complementary insights into tactical government. As I will explain, an analysis which also considers responses by civil servants who are more than reactive, ad hoc, and tactical is useful in analysing their practices (and the outcomes of these).

This move is inspired by the writings of Sherry Ortner, who has worked extensively on and with theories of practice.⁶⁶ Ortner distinguishes between two dimensions that emerge from 'the anthropology of agency'. The first considers agency as a form of power and includes acts of empowerment, domination, and resistance. This kind of agency is exemplified by the work of James Scott, Michel de Certeau, and others. Stemming as it does from this literature, I would place tactical government into this category of practice.

The second modality is agency 'as intentionality in the pursuit of (culturally defined) projects'.⁶⁷ Work on the second dimension includes that by writers such as Stephan Lubkemann, who look at everyday life in contexts of war. Lubkemann suggests that rather than simply 'coping', people embedded in a context of violence or instability remain engaged 'in the pursuit of a complex and multi-dimensional agenda of social struggles, interpersonal negotiations and life projects'.⁶⁸ Beyond the more reactive scope of coping-type practices, people may be engaged in a number of different longer term projects, for example related to livelihood strategies concerning access to resources.⁶⁹ Indeed, studies of everyday life in ostensibly

⁶⁵ S. B. Ortner, 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (1995); L. Abu-Lughod, 'The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women', *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990).

⁶⁶ Particularly, Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*; Ortner, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest*.

⁶⁷ Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, p. 145.

⁶⁸ S. Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 13.

⁶⁹ B. Korf, 'War, Livelihoods and Vulnerability in Sri Lanka', *Development and Change* 35, no. 2 (2004); B. Korf and H. Fünfgeld, 'War and the Commons: Assessing the Changing Politics of Violence, Access and Entitlements in Sri Lanka', *Geoforum* 37, no. 3 (2006); Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos*, p. 13.

extraordinary situations of insecurity show that it is not always clear where the one type of practice ends and the other one begins. This is even more the case when, as I have argued here and elsewhere, the extraordinary is fairly ordinary, and rupture and continuity are entangled. Ortner emphasizes that these two dimensions of agency are not two separate things. They are about different ways of giving meaning to action, and in everyday life and practice they are deeply interconnected.

Reconsidering 'absent presence', persuasion, and 'rule talk'

What additional insights can we gain from looking at 'absent presence', persuasion (convincing, leveraging), and 'rule talk' through this project-oriented lens? There are two aspects that I find particularly revealing. The first is the emphasis on intentionality in all its complexity and the second is the reminder that projects are informed and indeed scripted by culture. In this section I briefly describe these two aspects and return to the examples described earlier to consider how our analysis can be enriched through bringing in this additional complementary perspective. Indeed, my empirical findings suggest that the practices I have described above are more than just tactical. They may be ad hoc and opportunistic, but they are not only responsive to the 'ordinary extraordinary' context of local government in Nepal. With its strong roots in concepts of resistance, tactical government underplays the variety of other struggles and motivations at play in the mundane practices of local civil servants. Indeed, in some cases local civil servants are strongly influenced by completely different motivations or ideas.

Taking intentionality into consideration brings to the fore the cognitive and emotional factors that actively point action in a certain direction. In Ortner's words, 'intentionality in agency might include highly conscious plots and plans and schemes; somewhat more nebulous aims, goals and ideals; and finally, desires, wants and needs that may range from being deeply buried to quite consciously felt'.⁷⁰ Intentionality is difficult to know about—people might not be aware or able (or willing) to articulate the breadth and depth of their motivations. Furthermore, it is important to note that intentions are often a

⁷⁰ Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, p. 134.

focal point in talking about intentionality; at stake are not intentions per se but *attributions* of intention.⁷¹ Particularly when talking about past events, such as in/actions during the war, the attribution of intention is a key site of contestation. The important point is that, unlike looking at practices as tactics, which are basically unplanned, looking at the intentional aspects of practice allows us to reflect on the broader plans they may be part of. Tactics (as conceptualized by de Certeau, Feldman, and others) have an explicitly short-term orientation and do not attempt to steer outcomes. As Feldman writes, 'both the British Mandate and the Egyptian Administration survived by, in effect, relinquishing control over their future'.⁷² While the ad hoc nature of the structures of local government in Nepal seems to suggest a certain relinquishing of control over the future, I am not convinced that this can be said of individual civil servants. They may be working towards outcomes other than simply maintaining authority. There is no one bureaucratic way of doing things: rather, we should perceive 'bureaucrats as agents exercising choice in varying degrees of self-awareness and for a wide range of ends'.⁷³

If we consider the practice of 'absent presence', what other intentions might be there beyond what I have suggested as a tactical response of hiding in order to maintain (a limited) authority? In this case I think the actual resource at hand (agricultural inputs like seeds and fertilizer) was significant in affecting the intentions of both Mohan Bahadur and his colleagues at the local branch of the Agriculture Service Centre, as well as the Maoist authorities at war with the state they represented. Both sides recognized the importance of this resource for farmers; as Mohan Bahadur is a local person, and the farmers therefore his neighbours, they were also potential constituents/supporters for the Maoists. This meant that Mohan Bahadur was able to persist in trying to distribute the seeds and fertilizer using the tactic of hiding, and the Maoists kept up the pretence of not-seeing. Although it sounds like I am describing a game of hide-and-seek, this was in fact an extremely serious 'game' with very high stakes. At one point Mohan Bahadur was accused of being a government spy and spent several months moving between the houses of different relatives every night in order to avoid being abducted. So while the tactic of hiding created the conditions of possibility for

⁷¹ I am grateful to one of the reviewers for this insight.

⁷² Feldman, 'Everyday Government', p. 869.

⁷³ Herzfeld, 'Political Optics', p. 373.

him to continue having (a limited) authority over the distribution of resources, his intentions (and those of the Maoist authorities who might have tried to stop him) were affected both by personal and political relationships to the farmers and the high socio-economic importance of the resource in question. Likewise, if we look at the other examples described earlier, we can see other factors at play, from notions about the role played by toilets in 'development' or PR-related reasons for wanting a VDC profile. While the practices described here are tactical in terms of power dynamics and authority claims, they are also motivated by other layers of intention to promote a vision of what is considered good and right.

The second aspect of projects that I would like to explore here is their cultural scripted-ness. As we pointed out at the start, civil servants cannot be separated from the societies that they are both members of and try to rule. Local civil servants are socially and culturally situated people and the practices they mobilize are informed by this positionality.⁷⁴

Turning back to our examples, considering issues of culture helps to uncover other layers of meaning in the practices we have described. First, all of the civil servants whose work I have described are men and all belong to a relatively advantaged caste group (Chhetri).⁷⁵ They were either local to the (hill) district, or from a neighbouring district (and not from a culturally dissimilar part of the country). Much of the way in which they interact with people, and indeed the practices I have described here, are characterized by a paternalistic approach to the citizens they are meant to serve. This approach suggests that they, as educated people and technocrats, know what is best for others, even when it comes to very personal issues.⁷⁶ Cultural aspects are relevant for all of the three forms of practice I have outlined here, but are perhaps most striking when it comes to the issue of toilet construction that I used to exemplify the tactic of persuasion. In

⁷⁴ Elaborating on the relationship between the different kinds of cultures informing this script (bureaucratic culture, ethnic culture, etc.), particularly in a context as multicultural as Nepal, is beyond the scope of our present endeavour but would be an important contribution.

⁷⁵ The civil service is overwhelmingly drawn from the relatively advantaged social groups, particularly Brahmans. While the small cases I have elaborated here feature Chhetri civil servants, my wider pool of data includes interviews with both Brahman civil servants as well as civil servants from other social groups, particularly when they were locals of the area (i.e. Sherpa).

⁷⁶ Burghart, 'His Lordship at the Cobblers' Well'; Nightingale and Ojha, 'Rethinking Power'.

this case the VDC secretary tactically leveraged his ‘paper stamping’ authority to regulate something that is completely out of the scope of his authority. This tactic was not just a power play but was also related to a certain paternal claim to know ‘what is best’ for people and the extent to which they should prioritize sanitation facilities over other demands for (very scarce) resources. For ‘the good of the people’ the VDC secretary and local politicians claimed the authority to impose a rule that is clearly outside of their remit. Needless to say, this threat to withhold services in order to promote such a campaign seriously compromises the professional duties of the VDC secretary and indeed the relationship between citizens and the state, and—in the longer term—undermines legitimacy. The point of it was well understood by some local residents: ‘the construction of toilets on a compulsory basis is not in the rules. It has been made a rule in order to scare people [into constructing toilets].’⁷⁷ Looking at the cultural aspects of a civil servant playing the role of a stern parent—‘No citizenship papers until you build a toilet’—helps to shed light on another layer of meaning in this practice, beyond the internecine power play between local civil servants and politicians.

Conclusions

In this article I have examined how local civil servants produce the conditions of possibility for bureaucratic authority in a violently contested political environment and its aftermath. Specifically, I looked at the everyday practices of local civil servants as they attempted to influence the distribution of such public resources as agricultural inputs and local government budgets. Other influential actors contest this influence, whether Maoist People’s Governments keen to establish their support (during the war) or local politicians and resurgent patronage and politicking (post-war). In an ‘ordinary extraordinary’ context, where the ‘rules of the game’ are in semi-permanent flux and different authority contestants compete, local civil servants employ a form of practice that Ilana Feldman has termed ‘tactical government’. Expanding on the work of Michel de Certeau to the realm of governmental practice, Feldman’s tactical government is purposefully limited and adapts to changing circumstances rather

⁷⁷ Interview, 10 March 2012b.

than engaging in strategic planning. A government cannot function without both its representatives (civil servants) and the public recognizing its demands as being authoritative. According to Feldman, tactical government is a form of practice that produces sufficient authority to keep working despite very challenging contexts. In this article I have introduced three distinct practices, emerging from my research and building on the work of others, which can be considered tactical government: 'absent presence', persuasion (convincing, leveraging), and 'rule talk'.⁷⁸

However, I have also suggested that tactical practice tells only part of the story. Inspired by the work of Sherry Ortner, I argue that it can be insightful to enrich tactical government with an alternative approach to agency. Ortner conceptualizes this alternative as an approach to agency that considers (culturally informed) life projects. Such a suggestion is in line with recent work on everyday lives in situations of protracted violent conflict and insecurity, and on the role of culture in producing civil servants/services. Reconsidering through this lens the examples in which my categories of 'absent presence', persuasion, and 'rule talk' are grounded, allows us to uncover a wealth of additional layers of meaning to these practices.

In conclusion, what has become evident is that while ad hoc and tactical practices are an important part of how local civil servants produce authority in challenging contexts, they are motivated by a number of other, culturally informed considerations of what is good and how this can be achieved. Of course, these other considerations may also serve to reinforce authority claims. We are not talking about two separate fields of play but of different ways of inferring meaning from practices. In everyday life, these are deeply interconnected. The implication is that studies about civil servants (and indeed the states they produce) should take a holistic approach to understanding them as culturally and socially situated members of families and communities, as well as members of public administrations. In Ortner's words, the point of this analysis 'is not about heroic actors or unique individuals, nor is it about bourgeois strategizing; nor on the other hand is it entirely about routine everyday practices that proceed with little reflection'.⁷⁹ It takes time and the establishment of trust to access stories that elucidate the everyday, and perceptions of the

⁷⁸ Nuijten and Lorenzo, 'Ruling by Record'; Herzfeld, 'Absent Presence'; Williams, 'Absent Presence'.

⁷⁹ Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, p. 145.

everyday as it was, without over- or underestimating intentionality. However, it is important to reflect on how processes of authorization are influenced by and imbricated with any number of other ongoing projects. Even in 'ordinary extraordinary' contexts that necessitate tactical forms of practice in authorization processes, longer term considerations, dreams, and strategies play a role.

Furthermore, due to the pivotal role civil servants play in state-making processes, approaching their practices through an angle of culturally scripted life projects *as well as* bureaucratic authorization has implications for how we analyse state formation. States are in a constant process of being made, unmade, and remade, and to understand this process we have to look to the everyday practices of civil servants and citizens that produce them through their interactions. If we consider state formation as 'the mundane *practices* through which something which we label "the state" becomes present in everyday life',⁸⁰ then the rationale informing these practices has a 'state effect'.⁸¹ In other words, if the state is contingent upon, and emergent from, everyday practices of negotiating and producing forms of authority, then the nature and meaning of these practices is effective.

However, the production of this authority, as I have argued here, is in practice interconnected with a series of other culturally informed intentions and strategies. This means that processes of state formation should be analysed in a culturally situated way that looks not only at how the conditions of possibility for bureaucratic authority are produced, but also at the other culturally rooted factors informing bureaucratic practice. The analysis of the implementation of projects of rule should thus proceed in counterpoint to an analysis of other kinds of projects. This would allow us to account for more of the heterogeneity, complexity, and contradictoriness of state institutions and their outcomes, as well as patterns of remarkable consistency in state-citizen relations.

⁸⁰ J. Painter, 'Prosaic Geographies of Stateness', *Political Geography* 25, no. 7 (2006), p. 753.

⁸¹ T. Mitchell, 'The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics', *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991).